EXTENSIONS OF REMARKS

ADDRESS OF PROFESSOR ELIE WIESEL AT THE SPECIAL SESSION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY COMMEMORATING THE 60TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE LIBERATION OF NAZI DEATH CAMPS

HON. TOM LANTOS

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, February 10, 2005

Mr. LANTOS. Mr. Speaker, on January 24 of this year, the United Nations General Assembly commemorated the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Nazi death camps. January 27, 1945, was the date on which Russian troops liberated Auschwitz, the most notorious of the death camps, and the symbol of the Holocaust, in which over 6 million Jews and hundreds of thousands of other nationalities were brutally murdered during World War II.

Most of those individuals who spoke on this solemn and somber occasion were high government officials representing the United Nations or its member countries, but one of the most important and thoughtful speeches was given by Elie Wiesel, who like me is an American citizen by choice. He was welcomed to this incredibly generous nation as the American people reached out to those who were the victims of Nazi brutality, and our country has been enriched many times over by his talents and genius.

Probably more than any other individual, my friend Elie Wiesel has given more serious thought and scholarly attention to how in the twentieth century a civilized nation such as Germany could execute in a brutal and mechanically efficient fashion over six million human beings. He has not only probed why, but he has also focused on the question of why and how we must prevent such violence and evil again.

Mr. Speaker, Elie Wiesel has contributed a great deal to our nation as a professor and scholar, and as a man of action as the Founding Chair of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. The U.S. Holocaust Museum just a few blocks from this Capitol Building is an enduring testament to his vision, his understanding, and his commitment.

I ask, Mr. Speaker, that the outstanding address of Professor Elie Wiesel be placed in the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD, and I urge my colleagues to read his thoughtful remarks.

ADDRESS OF PROFESSOR ELIE WIESEL

Mr. President of the General Assembly, Mr. Secretary General my friend, excellencies: The man who stands before you this morning feels deeply privileged. A teacher and a writer, he speaks and writes as a witness to a crime committed in the heart of European Christendom and civilization by a brutal dictatorial regime—a crime of unprecedented cruelty in which all segments of government participated.

When speaking about that era of darkness, the witness encounters difficulties. His words become obstacles rather than vehicles; he writes not with words but against words. For there are no words to describe what the victims felt when death was the norm and life a miracle. Still whether you know it or not, his memory is a part of yours.

I speak to you as a son of an ancient people, the only people of Antiquity to have survived Antiquity, the Jewish people which, throughout much of its history, has endured exile and oppression yet has never given up hope of redemption.

As a young adolescent, he saw what no human being should have to see: the triumph of political fascism and ideological hatred for those who are different. He saw multitudes of human beings humiliated, isolated, tormented tortured and murdered. They were overwhelmingly Jews but there were others. And those who committed these crimes were not vulgar underworld thugs but men with high government, academic, industrial and medical positions in Germany. In recent years, that nation has become a true democracy. But the question remains open: In those dark years, what motivated so many brilliant and committed public servants to invent such horrors? By its scope and magnitude, by its sheer weight of numbers, by the impact of so much humiliation and pain, in spite of being the most documented tragedy in the annals of history, Auschwitz still defies language and understanding.

Let me evoke those times: Babies used as target practice by SS men . . . adolescents condemned never to grow old . . . parents watching their children thrown into burning pits . . . immense solitude engulfing an entire people . . . infinite despair haunting our days and our dreams even sixty years later.

When did what we so poorly call the Holocaust begin? In 1938, during Kristallnacht? In 1939 perhaps, when a German ship, the St. Louis, with more than a thousand German Jewish refugees aboard, was turned back from America's shores? Or was it when the first massacres occurred at Babi Yar?

We still ask: what was Auschwitz? An end or a beginning, an apocalyptic consequence of centuries-old bigotry and hatred, or was it the final convulsion of demonic forces in human nature?

A creation parallel to god's—a world with its own antinomian United Nations of people of different nationalities, traditions, cultures, socio-economic spheres, speaking many languages, clinging to a variety of faiths and memories. They were grown ups or young but inside that world there were no children and no grandparents; they had already perished. As have said many time: not all victims were Jewish, but all Jews were victims. For the first time in recorded history to be born became a crime. Their birth became their death sentence. Correction: Jewish children were condemned to die even before they were born. What the enemy sought to attain was to put an end to Jewish history; what he wanted was a new world implacably, irrevocably devoid of Jews. Hence Auschwitz, Ponar, Treblinka, Belzec, Chelmno and Sobibor: dark factories of death erected for the Final Solution. Killers came there to kill and victims to die.

That was Auschwitz, an executer's ideal of a kingdom of absolute evil and malediction with its princes and beggars, philosophers and theologians, politicians and artists, a place where to lose a piece of bread meant losing life, and a smile from a friend, another day of promise.

At the time, the witness tried to understand; he still does not. How was such calculated evil, such bottomless and pointless cruelty possible? Had Creation gone mad? Had God covered His face? A religious person cannot conceive of Auschwitz either with or without God. But what about man? How could intelligent, educated or simple law abiding citizens fire machine guns at hundreds of children and their parents, and in the evening enjoy a cadence by Schiller, a partita by Bach?

Turning point or watershed, that tremendous catastrophe which has traumatized History has forever changed man's perception of responsibility towards other human beings. The sad, terrible fact is that had the Western nations intervened when Hitler occupied Czechoslovakia and Austria; had America accepted more refugees from Europe; had Britain allowed more Jews to return to their ancestral land; had the Allies bombed the railways leading to Birkenau, our tragedy might have been avoided, its scope surely diminished.

This shameful indifference we must remember, just as we must remember to thank the few heroic individuals who, like Raoul Wallenberg, risked their lives to save Jews. We shall also always remember the Armies that liberated Europe and the soldiers that liberated the death-camps, the Americans in Buchenwald, the Russians in Auschwitz and the British in Belsen. But for many victims they all came too late. That we must also remember.

When the American Third Army liberated Buchenwald, there was no joy in our heart: only pain. We did not sing, we did not celebrate. We had just enough strength to recite the Kiddish.

And now, sixty years later, you who represent the entire world community, listen to the words of the witness. Like Jeremiah and Job, we could have cried and cursed the days dominated by injustice and violence. We could have chosen vengeance. We did not. We could have chosen hate. We did not. Hatred is degrading and vengeance demeaning. They are diseases. Their history is dominated by death.

The Jewish witness speaks of his people's suffering as a warning. He sounds the alarm so as to prevent these things being done. He knows for the dead it is too late. But it is not too late for today's children, ours and yours. It is for their sake alone that we bear witness. It is for their sake that we are duty-bound to denounce anti-Semitism, racism and religious or ethnic hatred. Those who today preach and practice the cult of death, those who use suicide terrorism, the scourge of this new century, must be tried and condemned for crimes against humanity. Suffering confers no privileges; it is what one does with suffering that matters. Yes, the past is in the present, but the future is still in our hands.

Those who survived Auschwitz advocate hope, not despair; generosity, not rancor or bitterness; gratitude, not violence. We must be enraged, we must reject indifference as an option. Indifference always helps the aggressor, never his victims. And what is memory if not a noble and necessary response to and against indifference?

But . . . will the world ever learn?